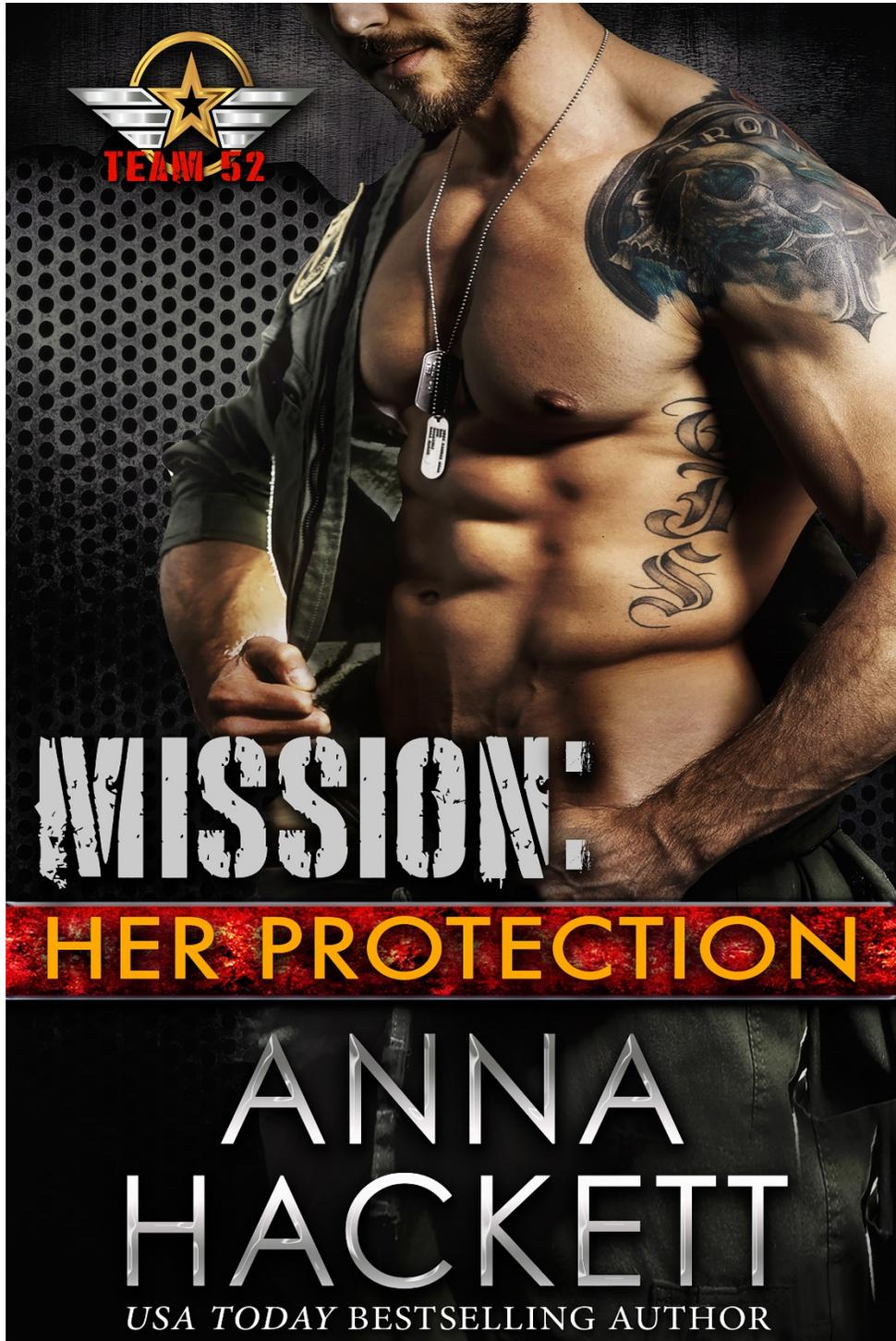


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## Chapter One

It was a beautiful day—ten below zero, and ice as far as the eye could see.

Dr. Rowan Schafer tugged at the fur-lined hood of her arctic parka, and stared across the unforgiving landscape of Ellesmere Island, the northernmost island in Canada. The Arctic Circle lay about fifteen hundred miles to the south, and large portions of the island were covered with glaciers and ice.

Rowan breathed in the fresh, frigid air. There was nowhere else she wanted to be.

Hefting her small pickaxe, she stepped closer to the wall of glacial ice in front of her. The retreating Gilman Glacier was proving a fascinating location. Her multi-disciplinary team of hydrologists, glaciologists, geophysicists, botanists, and climate scientists were more than happy to brave the cold for the chance to carry out their varied research projects. She began to chip away at the ice once more, searching for any interesting samples.

“Rowan.”

She spun and saw one of the members of her team headed her way. Dr. Isabel Silva’s parka was red like the rest of the team’s, but she wore a woolen hat in a shocking shade of pink over her black hair. Originally from Brazil, Rowan knew the paleobotanist disliked the cold.

“What’s the latest, Isabel?” Rowan asked.

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“The sled on the snowmobile is almost full of samples.” The woman waved her hand in the air, like she always did when she was talking. “You should have seen the moss and lichen samples I pulled. There were loads of them in area 3-41. I can’t *wait* to get started on the tests.” She shivered. “And be out of this blasted cold.”

Rowan suppressed a smile. *Scientists*. She had her own degrees in hydrology and biology, with a minor in paleontology that had shocked her very academic parents. But on this expedition, she was here as leader to keep her team of fourteen fed, clothed, and alive.

“Okay, well, you and Dr. Fournier can run the samples back to base, and then come back to collect me and Dr. Jensen.”

Isabel broke into a smile. “You know Lars has a crush on you.”

Dr. Lars Jensen was a brilliant, young geophysicist. And yes, Rowan hadn’t missed his not-so-subtle attempts to ask her out.

“I’m not here looking for dates.”

“But he’s kind of cute.” Isabel grinned and winked. “In a nerdy kind of way.”

Rowan’s mouth firmed. Lars was also several years younger than her and, while sweet, didn’t interest her in that way. Besides, she’d had enough of people trying to set her up. Her mother was always trying to push various *appropriate* men on Rowan—men with the right credentials, the right degrees, and the right tenured positions. Neither of her parents cared about love or passion; they just cared about how many dissertations and doctorates people collected. Their daughter included.

She dragged in a breath. That was why she’d applied for this expedition—for a chance to get away, a chance for some adventure. “Finish with the samples, Isabel, then—”

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Shouts from farther down the glacier had both women spinning. The two other scientists, their red coats bright against the white ice, were waving their arms.

“Wonder what they’ve found?” Rowan started down the ice.

Isabel followed. “Probably the remains of a mammoth or a mastodon. The weirdest things turn these guys on.”

Careful not to move too fast on the slippery surface, Rowan and Isabel reached the men.

“Dr. Schafer, you have to see this.” Lars’ blue eyes were bright, his nose red from the cold.

She crouched beside Dr. Marc Fournier. “What have you got?”

The older hydrologist scratched carefully at the ice with his pickaxe. “I have no idea.” His voice lilted with his French accent.

Rowan studied the discovery. Suspended in the ice, the circular object was about the size of her palm. It was dull-gray in color, and just the edge of it was protruding through the ice, thanks to the warming temperatures that were causing the glacier to retreat.

She touched the end of it with her gloved hand. It was firm, but smooth. “It’s not wood, or plant life.”

“Maybe stone?” Marc tapped it gently with the axe and it made a metallic echo.

Rowan blinked. “It can’t be metal.”

“The ice here is about five thousand years old,” Lars breathed.

Rowan stood. “Let’s get it out.”

With her arms crossed, she watched the scientists carefully work the ice away from the object. She knew that several thousand years ago, the fjords of the Hazen Plateau were populated by the mysterious and not-well understood Pre-Dorset and Dorset cultures. They’d made their

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homes in the Arctic, hunted and used simple tools. The Dorset disappeared when the Thule—ancestors to the Inuit—arrived, much later. Even the Viking Norse had once had communities on Ellesmere and neighboring Greenland.

Most of those former settlements had been near the coast. Scanning the ice around them, she thought it unlikely that there would have been settlements up here. And certainly not settlements that worked metal. The early people who'd made their home on Ellesmere hunted sea mammals like seals or land mammals like caribou.

Still, she was a scientist, and she knew better than to make assumptions without first gathering all the facts. Her drill team, who were farther up on the ice, were extracting ice core samples. Their studies were showing that roughly five thousand years ago, temperatures here were warmer than they were today. That meant the ice and glaciers on the island would have retreated then as well, and perhaps people had made their homes farther north than previously thought.

Marc pulled the object free with careful movements. It was still coated in a thin layer of ice.

“Are those markings?” Isabel breathed.

They sure looked like it. Rowan studied the scratches carved into the surface of the object. They looked like they could be some sort of writing or glyphs, but if that was the case, they were like nothing she'd ever seen before.

Lars frowned. “I don't know. They could just be natural scoring, or erosion grooves.”

Rowan pushed a few errant strands of her dark-red hair off her face. “Since none of us are archeologists, we're going to need an expert to take a look at it.”

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“It’s probably five thousand years old,” Isabel added. “If it is man-made, with writing on it, it’ll blow all accepted historical theories out of the water.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Rowan said calmly. “It needs to be examined first. It could be natural.”

“Or alien,” Lars added.

As one, they swiveled to look at the younger man.

He shrugged, his cheeks turning red. “Just saying. Odds are that we aren’t alone in this universe. If—”

“Enough.” Rowan straightened, knowing once Lars got started on a subject, it was hard to get him to stop. “Pack it up, get it back to base, and store it with the rest of the samples. I’ll make some calls.” It killed her to put it aside, but this mystery object wasn’t their top priority. They had frozen plant and seed samples, and ice samples, that they needed to get back to their research labs.

Every curious instinct inside Rowan was singing, wanting to solve the mystery. God, if she had discovered something that threw accepted ancient history theories out, her parents would be horrified. She’d always been interested in archeology, but her parents had almost had heart attacks when she’d told them. They’d quietly organized other opportunities for her, and before she knew it, she’d been studying hydrology and biology. She’d managed to sneak in her paleontology studies where she could.

Dr. Arthur Caswell and Dr. Kathleen Schafer expected nothing but perfection from their sole progeny. Even after their bloodless divorce, they’d still expected Rowan to do exactly as they wanted.

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Rowan had long-ago realized that nothing she ever did would please her parents for long. She blew out a breath. It had taken a painful childhood spent trying to win their love and affection—and failing miserably—to realize that. They were just too absorbed in their own work and lives.

*Pull up your big-girl panties, Rowan.* She'd never been abused and had been given a great education. She had work she enjoyed, interesting colleagues, and a lot to be thankful for.

Rowan watched her team pack the last of their samples onto the sled. She glanced to the southern horizon, peering at the bank of clouds in the distance. Ellesmere didn't get a lot of precipitation, which meant not a lot of snow, but plenty of ice. Still, it looked like bad weather was brewing and she wanted everyone safely back at camp.

“Okay, everyone, enough for today. Let's head back to base for hot chocolate and coffee.”

Isabel rolled her eyes. “You and your chocolate.”

Rowan made no apologies for her addiction, or the fact that half her bag for the trip here had been filled with her stash of high-quality chocolate—milk, dark, powdered, and her prized couverture chocolate.

“I want a nip of something warmer,” Lars said.

No one complained about leaving. Working out on the ice was bitterly cold, even in September, with the last blush of summer behind them.

Rowan climbed on a snowmobile and quickly grabbed her hand-held radio. “Hazen Team Two, this is Hazen Team One. We are headed back to Hazen Base, confirm.”

A few seconds later, the radio crackled. “Acknowledged, Hazen One. We see the clouds, Rowan. We're leaving the drill site now.”

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Dr. Samuel Malu was as steady and dependable as the sunrise.

“See you there,” she answered.

Marc climbed onto the second snowmobile, Lars riding behind him. Rowan waited for Isabel to climb on before firing up the engine. They both pulled their goggles on.

It wasn't a long trip back to base, and soon the camp appeared ahead. Seven large, temporary, polar domes made of high-tech, insulated materials were linked together by short, covered tunnels to make the multi-structure dome camp. The domes housed their living quarters, kitchen and rec room, labs, and one that held Rowan's office, the communications room, and storage. The high-tech insulation made the domes easy to heat, and they were relatively easy to construct and move. The structures had been erected to last through the seven-month expedition.

The two snowmobiles roared close to the largest dome and pulled to a stop.

“Okay, all the samples and specimens to the labs,” Rowan directed, holding open the door that led inside. She watched as Lars carefully picked up a tray and headed inside. Isabel and Marc followed with more trays.

Rowan stepped inside and savored the heat that hit her. The small kitchen was on the far side of the rec room, and the center of the dome was crowded with tables, chairs, and sofas.

She unzipped and shrugged off her coat and hung it beside the other red jackets lined up by the door. Next, she stepped out of her big boots and slipped into the canvas shoes she wore inside.

A sudden commotion from the adjoining tunnel had Rowan frowning. *What now?*

A young woman burst from the tunnel. She was dressed in normal clothes, her blonde hair pulled up in a tight ponytail. Emily Wood, their intern, was a student from the University of

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British Columbia in Vancouver. She got to do all the not-so-glamorous jobs, like logging and labelling the samples, which meant the scientists could focus on their research.

“Rowan, you have to come now!”

“Emily? What’s wrong?” Concerned, Rowan gripped the woman’s shoulder. She was practically vibrating. “Are you hurt?”

Emily shook her head. “You have to come to Lab Dome 1.” She grabbed Rowan’s hand and dragged her into the tunnel. “It’s *unbelievable*.”

Rowan followed. “Tell me what—”

“No. You need to see it with your own eyes.”

Seconds later, they stepped into the lab dome. The temperature was pleasant and Rowan was already feeling hot. She needed to strip off her sweater before she started sweating. She spotted Isabel, and another botanist, Dr. Amara Taylor, staring at the main workbench.

“Okay, what’s the big issue?” Rowan stepped forward.

Emily tugged her closer. “Look!” She waved a hand with a flourish.

A number of various petri dishes and sample holders sat on the workbench. Emily had been cataloguing all the seeds and frozen plant life they’d pulled out of the glacier.

“These are some of the samples we collected on our first day here.” She pointed at the end of the workbench. “Some I completely thawed and had stored for Dr. Taylor to start analyzing.”

Amara lifted her dark eyes to Rowan. The botanist was a little older than Rowan, with dark-brown skin, and long, dark hair swept up in a bun. “These plants are five thousand years old.”

Rowan frowned and leaned forward. Then she gasped. “Oh my God.”

The plants were sprouting new, green shoots.

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“They’ve come back to life.” Emily’s voice was breathless.

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The clink of silverware and excited conversations filled the rec dome. Rowan stabbed at a clump of meat in her stew, eyeing it with a grimace. She loved food, but hated the stuff that accompanied them on expeditions. She grabbed her mug—sweet, rich hot chocolate. She’d made it from her stash with the perfect amount of cocoa. The best hot chocolate needed no less than sixty percent cocoa but no more than eighty.

Across from her, Lars and Isabel weren’t even looking at their food or drink.

“Five thousand years old!” Isabel shook her head, her dark hair falling past her shoulders. “Those plants are millennia old, and they’ve come back to life.”

“Amazing,” Lars said. “A few years back, a team working south of here on the Teardrop Glacier at Sverdrup Pass brought moss back to life...but it was only four hundred years old.”

Isabel and Lars high-fived each other.

Rowan ate some more of her stew. “Russian scientists regenerated seeds found in a squirrel burrow in the Siberian permafrost.”

“Pfft,” Lars said. “Ours is still cooler.”

“They got the plant to flower and it was fertile,” Rowan continued, mildly. “The seeds were thirty-two thousand years old.”

Isabel pulled a face and Lars looked disappointed.

“And I think they are working on reviving forty-thousand-year-old nematode worms now.”

Her team members both pouted.

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Rowan smiled and shook her head. “But five-thousand-year-old plant life is nothing to sneeze at, and the Russian flowers required a lot of human intervention to coax them back to life.”

Lars perked up. “All we did was thaw and water ours.”

Rowan kept eating, listening to the flow of conversation. The others were wondering what other ancient plant life they might find in the glacial ice.

“What if we find a frozen mammoth?” Lars suggested.

“No, a frozen glacier man,” Isabel said.

“Like the Ötzi man,” Rowan said. “He was over five thousand years old, and found in the Alps. On the border between Italy and Austria.”

Amara arrived, setting her tray down. “Glaciers are retreating all over the planet. I had a colleague who uncovered several Roman artifacts from a glacier in the Swiss Alps.”

Isabel sat back in her chair. “Maybe we’ll find the fountain of youth? Maybe something in these plants we’re uncovering could defy aging, or cure cancer.”

Rowan raised an eyebrow and smothered a smile. She was as excited as the others about the regeneration of the plants. But her mind turned to the now-forgotten mystery object they’d plucked from the ice. She’d taken some photos of it and its markings. She was itching to take a look at them again.

“I’m going to take another look at the metal object we found,” Lars said, stuffing some stew in his mouth.

“Going to check for any messages from aliens?” Isabel teased.

Lars screwed up his nose, then he glanced at Rowan. “Want to join me?”

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She was so tempted, but she had a bunch of work piled on her desk. Most important being the supply lists for their next supply drop. She'd send her photos off to an archeologist friend at Harvard, and then spend the rest of her evening banging through her To-Do list.

"I can't tonight. Duty calls." She pushed her chair back and lifted her tray. "I'm going to eat dessert in my office and do some work."

"You mean eat that delicious chocolate of yours that you guard like a hawk," Isabel said.

Rowan smiled. "I promise to make something yummy tomorrow."

"Your brownies," Lars said.

"Chocolate-covered pralines," Isabel said, almost on top of Lars.

Rowan shook her head. Her chocolate creations were gaining a reputation. "I'll surprise you. If anyone needs me, you know where to find me."

"Bye, Rowan."

"Catch you later."

She set the tray on the side table and scraped off her plates. They had a roster for cooking and cleaning duty, and thankfully it wasn't her night. She ignored the dried-out looking chocolate chip cookies, anticipating the block of milk chocolate in her desk drawer. Yep, she had a weakness for chocolate in any form. Chocolate was the most important food group.

As she headed through the tunnels to the smaller dome that housed her office, she listened to the wind howling outside. It sounded like the storm had arrived. She sent up a silent thanks that her entire team was safe and sound in the camp. Since she was the expedition leader, she got her own office, rather than having to share space with the other scientists in the labs.

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In her cramped office, she flicked on her lamp and sat down behind her desk. She opened the drawer, pulled out her chocolate, smelled it, and snapped off a piece. She put it in her mouth and savored the flavor.

The best chocolate was a sensory experience. From how it looked—no cloudy old chocolate, please—to how it smelled and tasted. Right now, she enjoyed the intense flavors on her tongue and the smooth, velvety feel. Her mother had never let her have chocolate or other “unhealthy” foods growing up. Rowan had been forced to sneak her chocolate. She remembered her childhood friend, the intense boy from next door who’d always snuck her candy bars when she’d been outside hiding from her parents.

Shaking her head, Rowan reached over and plugged in her portable speaker. Soon she had some blood-pumping rock music filling her space. She smiled, nodding her head to the beat. Her love of rock-and-roll was another thing she’d kept well-hidden from her parents as a teenager. Her mother loved Bach, and her father preferred silence. Rowan had hidden all her albums growing up, and snuck out to concerts while pretending to be on study dates.

Opening her laptop, she scanned her email. Her stomach clenched. Nothing from her parents. She shook her head. Her mother had emailed once...to ask again when Rowan would be finished with her ill-advised jaunt to the Arctic. Her father hadn’t even bothered to check she’d arrived safely.

*Old news, Rowan.* Shaking off old heartache, she uploaded the photos she’d taken to her computer. She took a second to study the photos of her mystery object again.

“What are you?” she murmured.

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The carvings on the object could be natural scratches. She zoomed in. It really looked like some sort of writing to her, but if the object was over five thousand years old, then it wasn't likely. She knew the Pre-Dorset and Dorset peoples had been known to carve soapstone and driftwood, but this artifact would have been at the early point of Pre-Dorset history. Hell, it predated cuneiform—the earliest form of writing—which was barely getting going in Sumer when this thing had ended up in the ice.

She searched on her computer and pulled up some images of Sumerian cuneiform. She set the images side by side and studied them, tapped a finger idly against her lip. Some similarities...maybe. She flicked to the next image, chin in hand. She wanted to run a few tests on the object, see exactly what it was made of.

*Not your project, Rowan.* Instead, she attached the pictures to an email to send to her archeologist friend.

God, she hoped her parents never discovered she was here, pondering ancient markings on an unidentified object. They'd be horrified. Rowan pinched the bridge of her nose. She was a grown woman of thirty-two. Why did she still feel this driving need for her parents' approval?

With a sigh, she rubbed a fist over her chest, then clicked send on the email. Wishing her family was normal was a lost cause. She'd learned that long ago, hiding out in her treehouse with the boy from next door—who'd had a bad homelife as well.

She sank back in her chair and eyed the pile of paperwork on her desk. *Right, work to do.* This was the reason she was in the middle of the Arctic.

Rowan lost herself in her tasks. She took notes, updated inventory sheets, and approved requests.

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A vague, unsettling noise echoed through the tunnel. Her music was still pumping, and she lifted her head and frowned, straining to hear.

She turned off her music and stiffened. Were those screams?

She bolted upright. The screams got louder, interspersed with the crash of furniture and breaking glass.